

Why Collect Italy ?

Richard Harlow (1927 to 2021) wrote this item many years ago and we have retained it in our updated website as an excellent explanation of why Italian philately and postal history are so appealing.

Richard was the founder, in 1974, of Italy and Colonies Study Circle, gathering a team of enthusiasts who set the society on course with the journal, auctions and packet scheme. Study tours abroad, mostly Italy, planned and led by Richard, followed in 1990. With his business background in the stamp trade, an Italian wife (Pia) and many friends in Italy, Richard managed to find a marvellous range of material to fuel the auctions, which he ran, and enable members to build their collections and knowledge.

Because it is a great country to collect - with how many other countries can you commence your collection at the year 1250 or maybe earlier? From there one can go into the postal story of Principalities, Kingdoms, States, and Republics that quite regularly appeared and died. If your interest is solely adhesives, then from 1851 on there is a great range from the classics to modern commemoratives from which to choose.

So where does one start with Italy? Usually beginners go for the latest stamps of the Republic which are not only the easiest to acquire, they are plentiful also, and their cost, whether mint or used, is only a few pennies. As one gets back to the early issues of the Republic in the period 1945-1951, the situation changes somewhat; none of the stamps are at all difficult to acquire but their cost does increase a little into the pound range.

The next step then is to attempt to acquire the stamps of the Kingdom (1860-1943) and here the story is a little different and twofold. In the first period from 1860-1922 the mint stamps are more expensive, thereafter the used sets are more expensive. With a little perseverance most can be found without too much difficulty. Among this Kingdom group are to be found the largest number of printing errors - mostly perforations and overprints, misprints and watermark varieties.

Finally it is time to tackle the turbulent war period 1943-45 where one can find issues of the Allied Military Government, and the Badoglio Regency issues for Southern Italy . In the north there are the G.N.R. overprints, the Socialist Republic overprints and subsequent issues. These later were overprinted by some Partisan groups. Nor must we forget the issues of the Polish Corps.

The really dedicated philatelist may then decide to tackle the States - Lombardo-Veneto, Kingdom of Sardinia, Parma, Modena , Romagna, Tuscany, Papal States, Naples and Sicily - a veritable philatelic minefield where counterfeit stamps abound like cluster bombs. However, after some study, when the ability to detect good from bad is acquired, there is great scope for reward, for very few collectors take this path, preferring to leave it to the specialist. One can either pick up a stamp for a few pence or the specialist can charge you a little for telling you your stamp is bad, even more if it is good.

All this is available to the Italian collector and we have not even touched upon the stamps of the Post Offices abroad. Occupations - both of or by Italy - the colonies such as the Aegean Islands, Libya, Eritrea and Somalia or those two political islands of San Marino and the Vatican.

Should your interest be postal history, then there is just as much scope as with adhesives. Probably the most popular aspect of this interest is military postal history, and here there is a vast range of events to study. One could commence with the wars of Succession in the 1500s when Spanish and French forces fought across the Italian northern plain, and follow with the Holy Roman Empire campaigns, then the 1893-1914 Napoleonic period when Italy was opposed by the Austrian, Russian and British forces. In 1848 there was the 1st War of Independence led by Sardinia against Austria. Later, in 1855, Sardinia was involved in the Crimean war. In 1860 there was the 2nd Independence War - same protagonists - this time leading to unification. Postal history from Garibaldi's campaign is very difficult to find. In 1866, the 3rd War of Independence led to the recovery of the Veneto, and in 1870 the 4th War ended with the Fall of Rome. Forty-five years later we have World War I when alliances change once again and then change once more for World War II, 1940-1945.

If of a peaceful nature, you could turn your attention to lake steamer mail that was carried on all four of Italy's great lakes. Or to the private railway letter post of Tuscany. Maritime mail, letters that have been disinfected, and modern air mails are all challenges. Italy provided two of the world's great aviators in De Pinedo and his exploratory flights, and Italo Balbo with his mass formation flight to Chicago. There are also Railway TPOs, Pneumatic mail, Hotel posts (over 100) and, as editors love to say, much, much more.

Should that not be sufficient, one could turn back into the realms of time looking for how letters travelled from "A to B", finding explanations for symbols used on address panels and elsewhere. Or be like myself, ever seeking that earlier letter; where one's Holy Grail is the letter to Cristoforo Colombo at Genoa offering him a job; or a note to the family at Venice from Marco Polo at Cathay saying "Wish you were here".

Richard Harlow